

AUTUMN QUARTER

Commencement Address

Ohio State University

by Charles J. Ping

December 9, 1994

An Ode to the University

To the graduates, congratulations on completing your degrees! Degree in hand, you now go on to the next phase of your life: for some, additional study; for others, the start of careers. I wish you well.

To the parents, family members, friends, this is a moment to cherish. I rejoice with you in your sense of pride in the accomplishments of the graduates.

For many families, the new year will be the blessed year 1995 A.T., that is, After Tuition. Last spring at the Kent State commencement exercises as students were parading across the platform, someone in the audience, probably a father, rose as his daughter's name was called to announce in a loud voice, "Free at

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last! Thank God, free at last!" Now, as a parent and grandparent, I understand the feeling, but I can testify that the years ahead won't quite be that way.

President Gee, thank you for the invitation to share in this happy occasion. I take the invitation as a personal honor and as an honor for my university. Ohio State University and Ohio University share a common heritage of the land-grant tradition of universities in the nation's service. Ohio State traces its mission to the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 that established in each state an endowment of federal land "to promote liberal and practical education" of the people in "the several pursuits and professions" The heritage of Ohio University is an earlier grant of land from the Continental Congress, establishing frontier institutions to provide the education deemed necessary for good government. More broadly, our two campuses are part of the much older institution and idea of the university.

The university as idea and institution has occupied most of my life. Forty-seven years as student, professor, and administrator have served to quicken my passion for the university. I am not

blind or indifferent to the faults of the university. Indeed, the way a university works, or fails to work, has been and continues to be a source of great frustration. When I was preparing to leave administration to return to my teaching and research, the Faculty Senate of Ohio University honored me by naming me a senator for life. While I am grateful for the honor, the prospect of a lifetime spent in committee meetings and senate debates is my own private vision of hell. And, having appointed so many committees, when I am given my just fate, I suspect it will be a committee meeting that goes on forever with no two people speaking in sequence to the same point and the committee never reaching a conclusion.

The university as an institution has been subjected to withering criticism in our times. But, the criticism itself establishes the idea as an enduring ideal for the criticism focuses on the failure of the university to become what it professes itself to be.

Universities in their structure and life have varied widely from age to age; as institutions, universities differ from country to country, from campus to campus. But, while taking many forms,

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the university is one of the most enduring and universal of institutions in human history.

Universities in the Western tradition trace their institutional life and form to the Middle Ages, their idea to the classical civilization of ancient Greece. The university, however, is not limited to the Western world and has flowered in many cultures, over millennia in China and India and over many centuries in such centers of learning as Constantinople, Baghdad, Alexandria, Cairo, Morocco, Prague, Heidelberg, Oxford, Mexico City. "The idea becomes concrete in the institution," Karl Jaspers, a 20th century existentialist philosopher and university rector, wrote. The idea "... exists only to the extent that it is institutionalized." But existence as an institution creates tension with the idea. "... institution implies compromises. The idea is never perfectly realized"¹ in an institution.

The idea of the university is defined for me by four principal tasks. It is those tasks that have captured my life.

¹Jaspers, Karl: *The Idea of the University*, 1959, page 70.

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1. The university nurtures critical intelligence and rational objectivity.

The Western university tradition has its roots in the ancient Greek academy. There, Socrates' probing questions provided the teaching methodology of the Academy and inspiration for universities ever since. Socrates insisted that human virtue, the realization of the distinct human potential of life, is examination, that is, the weighing and debating of definitions and judgments critically and objectively. Socrates brought to the test of dialogue, to discussion and critical review, "unexpressed popular judgments about life . . . [truths] taken for granted by everyone."²

The end of education, he argued, is the realization of human potential. There is an excellence, following Socrates, a perfection of nature for everything and everyone. Accordingly, the virtue or excellence of a knife as a knife is to cut well; there is an excellence of a racehorse, namely, to run fast. The virtue, the excellence, of human existence, the realization of human potential, is to live the criticized, the examined, life. The unexamined life, Socrates forcefully asserted, is not worth living. Why? Because

²Church, F.J., *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 1886, page xlix. Quoted in Livingston, Sir R.W., *Portrait of Socrates*, 1938, page xxxviii.

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such a life fails to realize the human potential. The nurture of critical intelligence and rational objectivity is the work of the university.

2. The university prepares graduates to be productive, contributing members of society.

The university is a dependent institution, created and supported by various societies out of the conviction that society has a need for educated leaders and citizens, public officials, teachers, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople and that society has a need for the creation and dissemination of knowledge and technology. To do their work, universities are granted a degree of autonomy but society defines the role of the university. Specific expectations addressed to universities reflect the needs of a particular era or place, as the history of both Ohio University and Ohio State University illustrates. The constant in the idea of the university, even in the presence of changing expectations, is the imperative to respond to the needs of the times.

To prepare for a Fulbright research appointment to southern Africa which begins next month, I have spent the past three months reading widely in reports, books, and articles that analyze the role

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and the state of universities in Africa. This study of the university in the less-developed countries of Africa is part of a larger exploration of the changing role of the university in the contemporary world. Given the plight of Africa, there is a common theme expressed in all the literature on the role of African universities. This common theme is summarized in the words of one report:

"Without education, development will not occur. Only an educated people can command the skills necessary for a sustainable economic growth and a better quality of life."³

The crisis in the universities of Africa mirrors the deep crises of economies and national politics. The demand addressed to the university is to respond to urgent needs, to prepare graduates to be productive, contributing members of those developing societies.

³World Bank: *Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 1988, page 69.

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What is being expressed in this understanding of the role of the university is an essential and universal idea. University education is both private gain and public good. It is the private gain by which individuals acquire knowledge and skill and prepare for careers. University education is a public good insofar as this knowledge and skill enhance a potential for productive work.

Knowledge is to be desired in and of itself, but knowledge is also power. Like an electrical current, knowledge is a force to light and drive society.

3. The university teaches the value of both knowledge and of the processes by which knowledge is attained.

A series of propositions are basic to the definition of the idea of the university: knowledge is better than ignorance; fact is to be preferred over opinion; emotion and strong feelings are to be tested by thought; sensitivity and appreciation are to be cultivated in reflection as well as immediacy.

Aristotle, the classical Greek philosopher and one of the leaders of the early Academy, sought rational explanations of the

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mysteries of the universe. He offered as a fundamental premise of his *Metaphysics* the assertion, "All men by nature desire to know."⁴

The valuing of knowledge challenges sophistry of persuasive rhetoric. People have always been subjected to the cynical manipulation of reality in persuasive images, by the espousal of strongly held opinions as the measure of truth in argument, by the overriding of reason in belligerent, shouted slogans. The university mission to combat these practices is at least as old as the dialogue between Socrates and the Sophists in the last decades of the fourth century B.C. What is different in the modern world is the appearance of powerful technologies for communication, finely honed techniques of persuasion, and the overbearing, insistent enforcement of opinion. Sit for an hour or two analyzing the advertisements on television, turn on a talk show and listen closely to the arguments, re-read the political mailings that so recently filled mailboxes. Against the force of this persuasion and manipulation, misinformation and distortion, belligerent and willful

⁴Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book One, Section One.

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opinion, the valuing of knowledge is both the high calling of the Academy and a desperately needed corrective for our times.

4. Finally, the university has as a fourth defining task the development of the awareness, the appreciation, and the acceptance of differences.

Universities teach languages that in their separate settings are foreign. Ohio State University teaches Japanese; Kyoto University in Japan teaches English as a foreign language. Universities bring into dialogue conflicting points of view. They are open forums to challenge accepted wisdom. Universities accept qualified students and scholars from many countries. University education is defined by this openness, by the willingness to explore different theories and systems, different cultures and perspectives, different beliefs and values, different practices and customs.

The people of this world are separate and many. There is richness and variety in our global village. That we are different all too often sets us against one another. Languages and cultures divide; gender separates; religions sets apart.

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Moreover, the human tolerance for difference is alarmingly low. People make war because of differences of race, or tribe, or creed, or even simply customs or lifestyles. The conflict is sparked by that instinctive distrust and fear of all that is unfamiliar or different.

The acceptance advanced by the idea of the university is the embracing of difference and disagreement as a way of expanding and enriching understanding. The task of the university is not to overcome differences, but to develop an acceptance born of the appreciation of the differences themselves. In turn, the appreciation of the use of difference can overcome the distrust and fear that leads to conflict.

We cannot end war or address basic human needs for food, health, and education; we cannot preserve our fragile environment or prosper economically without understanding how much we as individuals and nations are dependent upon each other.

This fateful gap between our separation and interdependence must be closed. With the horror of world war still fresh in

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everyone's mind, Senator William J. Fulbright introduced into the United States Congress in 1945 the Educational Exchange Act. Congress quickly passed legislation creating a world-wide exchange of senior and apprentice scholars. Reflecting some years later on why he sponsored the bill, Senator Fulbright said that education and exchange build the perceptions and perspectives about various peoples of the world so necessary to appreciate the common humanity which unites us. "In a word," he wrote, "we must seek through education to develop *empathy*, that rare and wonderful ability to perceive the world as others see it."

It is easy to accept the need for empathy at a distance and miss the causes of conflict close at hand. Tribal warfare throughout the world has its counterpart on campus and in the larger society. Discrimination, intolerance, hatred, and violence are the product of the failure to accept difference and the transposing of the fact of difference to a judgment of superiority.

The task of the university is not to remove differences, not even to overcome the sense of being other than, but rather through education to root out sources of fear and conflict, to create an

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acceptance and an appreciation of the differences that separate us. This is a large task, an important task, a task that draws on the basic values of openness, exploration, and tolerance which define the idea of the university.

My remarks are an ode to the university, a philosophical poem on a public occasion, a hymn of praise and celebration. You are soon to be formally admitted to various university degrees and will join the distinguished company of The Ohio State University graduates. I rejoice with you that the university puts this mark on your academic achievements and I earnestly hope that what the university nurtures and teaches, what the university is as an ideal, will remain a force in your lives and command your interest and support.

Congratulations!